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## ABSTRACT

### **Geographies that matter – the rhetorical deployment of physicality?**

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Jackson (2000) proposes a ‘re-materialisation’ of social and cultural geography. He argues for the grounding of geographical analysis in the concrete world of actual physical objects. Examining the work of Jackson (2000) and Miller (1987, 1998) this paper interrogates this return to the physical. In particular this paper argues that current articulations of physicality rely on a universal metaphysics of matter – positing matter as a universally undifferentiated conditionality. This reliance is problematic in that it signifies an essentialist dichotomy between the objective (the material) and the subjective (the textual). Also this dichotomy necessitates a linear dialectics of matter subjugating the material to the determinative action of form. In subjecting Jackson’s notion of rematerialisation to a critical philosophical reading the aim is to disturb the unquestioned metaphysical implications of this return. Indeed it is to suggest that a rematerialisation of social and cultural geography must account for the wayward expressiveness of matter – its representative and active capacities outside its relation with the subject.

#### Key Words:

Matter, materiality, object, physical, ontology.

## ARTICLE

### Geographies that matter – the rhetorical deployment of physicality?

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O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a King of infinite space. *Hamlet*, II:2

#### Introduction

The theme of this special edition of *Social and Cultural Geography* – ‘Culture Matters’ – resonates with a number of themes current within geographical thought. The double meaning of ‘matter’ – simultaneously designating a concept of worth (the verb ‘to matter’) and a physical ‘materiality’ (the noun ‘matter’) – is symbolic of the broad scope of its terms. In the first instance matter is used in asserting the *significance* of certain academic accounts. For a particular account to be significant – to be of strategic, political or professional importance – it must ‘matter’. Put in this way the rhetorical force of matter is clear. Imbued with notions of the undiluted physicality of ‘the real’, for a representation ‘to matter’ it must be mimetically linked with an external materiality – the real world. ‘To matter’ is thus simultaneously to designate the importance of a particular representation and to engage in the active creation of a mimetic materiality. ‘To matter’ is therefor also ‘to do matter’, to produce certain forms of physicality deemed discursively significant. In this way matter occupies a rhetorical position within contemporary geographical criticism. The material connotations of matter – its sensuous proximity to the real – are used to signify the veracity or significance of certain representations. The theme ‘Culture Matters’ echoes this rhetoric by provocatively recalling the early criticisms of cultural geography as lacking material bases and therefor interpretative significance (Badcock, 1996; Mitchell, 1995; 1996)<sup>1</sup>. These criticisms suggested that cultural analyses lack grounding in material reality (a limited characterisation at best) and therefor they also lack significance. The effect of these criticisms is to suggest that cultural geography does not produce an appropriately mimetic materiality – that it is abstract or novel – and thus that it ‘does not matter’. For example Mitchell (1995) directly contrasts the analysis of cultural against matter – as an analysis of ephemerality. He states that:

[F]or all the important theoretical and empirical advances this reconceptualization (of culture) has induced, cultural geography still reifies ‘culture’ and assigns it an

ontological and explanatory status. ... I argue instead for a focus on the *material* development of the idea (or ideology) of culture. (p. 102, emphasis added)

For Mitchell (1995) culture cannot be reified as an explanatory device simply because it has no material physicality. Culture, for Mitchell, does not matter. It is the possibility of analysis unconnected – and seemingly unconcerned – with material and empirical reality that troubles both Mitchell and Badcock. The terminology of matter – of the potent significance of the material – is deployed symbolically against this very possibility. Culture is denied any ontological *basis* outside its physical materialisation. Heroically returning analysis to the mimetic *safety* of matter the significance of geographical scholarship is presented as proportional to its connection with empirical and material reality. The rhetorical articulation of ‘geographies that matter’ has involved an articulation of the physicality of its field of enquiry. For example there have been a number of calls for a geographical return to a grounding in physical materiality. Jackson (2000) proposes a ‘re-materialisation’ of social and cultural geography – a return to more traditional geographical concerns based in the ‘actual’ life-world of people. Similarly Philo (2000) proposes a ‘re-introduction of the material in human geography’. There is a distinction here in the precise connotations of both Jackson’s and Philo’s (re)invocation of matter in human geography. For Jackson to re-introduce a kind of materialist analysis is to refocus attention on the relationship between people and things (Lees, 2002). Whereas Philo is driven by a Latourian desire to expressly re-valorise the irreducible materiality of the objects of geographic research. Indeed Philo (2000) makes this claim by suggesting that matter is somehow lost within contemporary social and cultural geography. He states:

Yet , what I wish to signpost now are some concerns that I (and others) have about this *dematerializing* of human geography: the preoccupation with immaterial cultural processes, with the constitution of intersubjective meaning systems, with the play of identity politics through the less-than-tangible, often-fleeting spaces of texts, signs, symbols, psyches, desires, fears and imaginings. I am concerned that, in the rush to elevate such spaces in our geographical studies, we have ended up being less attentive to the more ‘thingy’, bump-into-able, stubbornly there-in-the-world kinds of ‘matter’ (the material) with which earlier geographers tended to be more familiar. (p. 33)

It is suggested that the analysis of culture – which has hitherto been confined to an hermeneutic consideration of cultural, textual, and discursive *meaning* – needs to be firmly grounded in the analysis of the physical manifestation of culture (Gregson, 1995; Miller, 1987; 1998). Thus, for example, it is suggested that contemporary studies of cultural

consumption must consider the materiality of consumed objects rather than rely solely upon abstract semiotic or textual methodologies. In this way the double meaning of matter is simultaneously deployed – that for geographies to ‘matter’ they must *return* to ‘the material’. In this way this paper analyses the double meaning of this return to matter – the proposition that representative significance is *necessarily* tied to material physicality. Indeed the subject of this discussion is not only this articulation of a kind of physicalist analysis into geography but also the way in which it is expressly constructed as a return to a more basic form of analysis.

‘The physical’ connotes a diverse range of contemporary thought. Feminist scholars have called for an analysis of the ways in which subjectivity and cognition are formed through a bodily inhabitation of the physical world (Grosz, 1994; Gatens, 1996; Kirby, 1997; Longhurst, 1997). Indeed, Butler (1993; 1994; 1997) initiated the use of term ‘materialisation’ to express the ways in which the corporeal subject is materialised through regimes of power and discourse. The notion of a corporeal inhabitation of the physical world – or ‘dwelling’ – the inter-subjective experience of the material world has also been explored by authors challenging the inherent anthropocentrism of ‘human’ geography. In exploring the ways in which human dwelling(s) of and in the material world are necessarily co-dependent upon non-human actors (Ingold, 1995) notions of the non-human and material subjectivity, sociality and relationality have been explored (Murdoch, 1997; Whatmore, 1997; 2000). Also drawing upon the work of Latour’s (1993) notion of a ‘parliament of things’, Law’s (1994; see also Law and Mol [1995]) conception of a ‘relational materialism’ and Serres’ (1995) quizzical ‘quasi-object’, contemporary authors in geography have sought to re-read the traditional philosophical *subject-object* relation precisely as a *relational intersubjectivity* (Bingham, 1996; Hinchliffe, 1996). Indeed, the focus upon the various ways in which human subjectivity is constituted in and through a relational embodiment of the material, natural and inter-subjective world necessitates a valorisation of the physical.

In these ways both the material and the physical are invoked tangentially. That is matter is implicated in an analysis of the embodiment of the subject in a physical body, in a notion of discursive materialisation and in the re-thinking of the subject-object relation as a complex network. This paper does not attempt to deal with the breadth of this field. Rather it is the deployment of the notion of physicality – the ‘thingness’ of things, the

tactility of matter – that this paper explicitly explores. In fact the notion of physicality – the valorisation of the cultural ‘object’ over meaning, discourse and language – advanced in the work of Miller (1987; 1998), Jackson (2000), Philo (2000) and Lees (2002) is specifically addressed in this discussion<sup>2</sup>. Whereas other movements insinuate a notion of ‘the physical’ or ‘the (materially) relational’ these authors extend their analytical scope to matter itself. The significance of this fact is that by constructing a rematerialisation these authors awaken a metaphysical Pandora’s box. To discuss matter is to discuss one of the most philosophically enduring concepts in Western metaphysics. The idea that social and cultural geography may simply ‘return’ to a lost materialism must be enlivened with a thorough consideration of which (or perhaps whose) matter we are returning to<sup>3</sup>.

The aim here is to *complicate* notions of physicality by suggesting that contemporary calls for a return to the material problematically adopt a universal metaphysics of matter. Western philosophical history is dominated by a conception of a universal, Aristotelian metaphysics of matter – that matter is a universal attribute of all things that exist physically. Matter is that which forms the universal ontological basis of all existing things. Such universalist tendencies in the wider philosophical consideration of matter present many dilemmas for a geographical project that aims to be theoretically non-essentialist (through the critique of hegemonic dualisms) and methodologically particularist (through ethnographic analyses of *specific* materialities). As such this paper suggests that calls for a ‘return to the material’ in social and cultural geography must be more philosophically explicit. Without candid consideration of the metaphysical connotations of a ‘return to the material’ such a project remains ill conceived and self-contradictory. By considering the metaphysical implications of these moves I will conclude by suggesting a notion of the ‘expressive physicality of matter’ – that matter is not simply a base to which geographical analysis may return. Rather to construct a material analysis is to ‘collaborate’ with the physical, to enliven its own capacities and variances.

### **A ‘return to the material’**

Jackson (2000) paraphrasing Gregson (1995) calls for a renewed grounding of social and cultural geography in the *materiality of culture*.

... Nicky Gregson warned that social geography’s recent obsession with meaning, identity, representation and ideology was in danger of replacing studies that were more firmly grounded in *material culture* or concerned with socially significant differences of gender, class, race, sexuality or (dis)ability. While the potential evacuation of ‘the social’ in social and cultural geography remains a serious

concern, it is the other less remarked part of Gregson's commentary that most concerns me here, heralding the *revival of a material culture* perspective in social and cultural geography. (p. 9, emphasis added)

He suggests that contemporary geographical research practices have largely ignored the physical manifestations of the objects of their analysis. Jackson, in concert with Gregson, suggests that cultural geography's utilisation of contemporary theories of representation has served to obscure the material manifestation of culture. There is a concern that the current integration of post-structuralist and post-modernist theories into mainstream geographical practice has resulted in a limiting textual bias. It is suggested that contemporary theories of discourse have negated the need for a consideration of the material altogether – that the analysis of culture through linguistic and semiotic strategies has largely resulted in the disappearance of the 'real' object from contemporary analysis (Vattimo, 1988; Kirby, 1999). For example:

And yet, although the difference between words and experience is a difference that seems to require no special justification in everyday life, this simple wisdom undergoes a significant make-over when it enters the academy. Postmodern meta-critique for example, informs us that language is the irreducible object of *all* analysis. Language determines the particular purchase and shape of different disciplinary formations; it illuminates the psychological architecture of the interpreting subject; and its internal structuration explains the inevitable contamination between subject and object. Language becomes a mode of production whose effects are so pervasive and persuasive that even materiality evaporates into an *idée fixe*. (Kirby, 1999, 19)

Kirby's acerbic critique of current scholarship suggests that an unhealthy fixation upon language has resulted in the destruction of the most basic, everyday distinction between words and experience. The denigration of this distinction, by epistemological strategies that posit language as a totalising system of signification, has meant that *even matter* – the most fundamental basis of 'real' experience – has disappeared from current thought. For Jackson (2000), Philo (2000) and Lees (2002) the dominance of textual methodologies have obscured fuller analysis of the materiality of contemporary culture. Both Jackson (2000) and Philo (2000) evoke the physicality of cultural forms and artifacts as an alternative analytical grounding. Jackson's call for a re-materialisation of social and cultural geography and Philo's appeal for a re-introduction of the material is an attempt to construct an analysis of culture that takes this physicality seriously – to re-direct geographical analysis away from textual, semiotic and discursive methodologies towards the material manifestations of culture in the *actual object*. Both assert that there is a need to return to ways in which culture is manifested materially. Both suggest that the analysis of

practices of consumption, for example, should no longer be confined to semiotic or deconstructive reading of consumptive imagery and texts. Rather the analysis of consumption should, it is suggested, include a thorough ethnographic consideration of the physical objects consumed, and the ways they are materially incorporated into the embodied life-world of the consumer. This methodology is propelled by a broader desire to understand what people *actually* do when they consume.

The language of ‘a *return* to matter’ – of *re*-materialisation – suggests that matter occupies a pre-existent and *a priori* position with respect to language and text. The methodological distinction made by Jackson (2000) and Philo (2000) between text and matter subtly points to the metaphysical effect of Jackson’s and Philo’s return to the material. Textual, semiotic and discursive strategies are cast solely as renderings of the object – teleologically secondary and categorically distinct from the object of representation. This conceptualisation represents the material, the natural and the bodily as in some way *a priori* to forms of language and representation. The material forms a pre-existing, and absolute conditionality upon the construction of knowledge through language. The representation of matter as a form of ‘original state’ – as the *pure thing* outside the operation of discourse and independent (in the Kantian sense) from the subjective action – is indicative of the proximity of these calls to an essentialist metaphysics.

The enterprise of returning ‘strategically’, ideally, to an origin or to a ‘priority’ held to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident etc. all metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound. (Derrida, 1988, quoted in Kirby, 1999).

Derrida suggests that the strategic return to forms of material originality – the ‘real’ object of analysis – constitutes a metaphysical move *par excellence*. The crucial term in Derrida’s designation is the term *before*, indicating the teleologic quality of the calls for a return to forms of pure originality. Similarly, calls for a re-materialisation of social and cultural geography represent matter as an analytical ground by virtue of its *pre-existing* physicality. Although Jackson (2000) states that: ‘[O]ur emphasis should be on when and where the materiality of material culture makes a difference rather than assuming its



importance in an *a priori* manner' (p. 13), matter is articulated in both *a priori* and Kantian terms as both absolutely physical and fundamentally pure. Similarly in constructing his material re-introduction Philo (2000) discusses the work of Lees and operationises a notion of matter as both basic and universal: 'Lees ranges fully across a host of different material and immaterial realms. The *brute there-ness* of the buildings and its contents is described ...' (p. 35, emphasis added). It is only by the unquestioned assumption of a Kantian notion of matter's metaphysical priority that Philo is able to insinuate the meaning of matter is a brutal there-ness. There is nothing inherent to matter that ensures either its brutality or its physical stability. Rather these notions are simple meanings that matter assumes under the influence of a universalist metaphysics.

### **Essence and image**

This notion of re-materialisation, advocated by Jackson (2000), Philo (2000) and Lees (2002) establishes a dichotomy between words and experience – or between the real world of matter and the abstract realm of discourse. As stated above it is suggested that contemporary theoretical strategies have – for the sake of intellectual fashion – largely ignored the 'real' world in all its physical messiness and uncertainty. It is suggested that the sheer immensity of the material world has proved too difficult to intellectual scholarship, which has by-and-large retreated towards the more manageable and stable grounds of language. It is the distinction between the material and the linguistic that is held to be paramount. For example:

Material culture differs from, for example, linguistics partly in the sheer diversity of its subject matter. In the case of language many of the most interesting things that an academic can address relate to the generality of linguistic phenomena. In material culture, by contrast, although this is also a possible strategy there is a great deal more potential in looking at the diversity of material form than would be the case with linguistics. (Miller, 1998, 6)

In this way language and matter are presented as opposing realms, matter as defiantly diverse and multiple and language as limited, confined and as knowable<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, *the material* operates as a sign for *the natural*, the pre-discursive or the *a priori*. In this account matter stands for that which is prior to – and forms a basis for – human experience, perception and knowledge. The radical diversity of matter – the seeming omnipresence of matter – signifies the impossibility of confining the material realm within knowable boundaries. In this way the works of language are cast as perpetually secondary to the pre-eminent materiality and pre-discursivity of the 'real' world. In comparison to the infinite multiplicity of matter language is presented as simply a product of human

experience, as *a posteriori*, and therefor as a finite image of the external world. Miller's (1987; 1998) re-articulation of the significance of the material within cultural studies represents an attempt to heroically 'get back to basics' – to refuse the valorisation of mediated (ie linguistic) knowledge over ethnographic, experiential and material knowledge.

The methodological distinction established between subjective textuality and objective physicality is informed by a palpable *distrust* of contemporary semiotic, textual and de-constructive methodologies. These methodologies represent the possibility of representative analysis disconnected from the referent. This distrust of textual and discursive strategies – a fear of the power of the image (Jay, 1993) – mirrors both the Platonic distrust of the image and notions of religious idolatry. Plato (383 BC [1955]) constructs a dualism between the object and its appearance. The reality of the object is, for Plato, defined by the essence of the object, a fundamental and irreducible attribute of every physical object. In comparison the image of an object is divorced from the essence of the object. The object is defined objectively by its essence, whilst the image is simply a secondary *resemblance* of the object. An object has an essence or reality in and of itself, by virtue of the fact that it IS. The essence of the object is not the physical tactility of the object's contours, which are based in appearance and sensation, but is the IDEA of the object. The essence is the irreducible reality that is endowed in the object, by which it is possible to claim that it exists independently of other objects. Alternatively an object's physical appearance, or its representation in other medium (for example a work of art), has no essence in and of itself. The representation of the object does not exist independently but is rather a copy or imitation of the object's essence. The representation is tied mimetically to, and is therefor dependent upon, the object's essence. The object is thus the model and its appearance is the copy (Plato, 383 BC [1955]).

Plato constructs a range of dualisms, around the central essence/appearance dichotomy, such as substance/form, model/copy and philosophy/poetry. Always valorising the first term in each dichotomy Plato constructs an ontological critique of the arts as solely imitative, divorced from the originality of philosophy (Plato, 383 BC [1955]; Deleuze, 1967). For example he discusses the relationship of the painting with the original depicted object:

“You may perhaps object that the things he (the craftsman or painter) creates are not real; and yet there *is* a sense in which the painter creates a bed, isn’t there?”

“Yes”, he agreed, “He produces an appearance of one.”

...

“If then, what he makes is not ‘what a bed really is’ his product is not ‘what is’ but something that *resembles* ‘what is’ without *being* it.” (Plato, 383 BC [1955], 424)

Plato’s aim is to establish a universal image-free metaphysics. He is wary of the image and its capacity to produce resemblances divorced from the essence of the object. The danger posed by the image is the danger of idolatry – that as secondary and lesser to the object it has the power to replace the object with the mere play of resemblances. In this way the possibilities for the reproduction of images with no reference to the original object is most concerning. It is the potential proliferation of copies without referent, the order of simulacra, that Plato designates as most deleterious to the ideal society.

Indeed, it is this anxiety regarding the possibility of representation not bound to an essential, or fundamentally pre-discursive reality that is at the heart of calls to ground research in the materiality of cultural objects. For example Gregson (1995), Miller (1987, 1998) and Jackson (2000) react against the very possibility of representative simulacra – the proliferation of novel representations that bear no relation to an *external* material reality of the both the object or the subject’s embodied interaction with it. The call for a re-materialisation of social and cultural geography constitutes a Platonic drive to re-establish and re-enforce the link between academic representation and essentially real objects. The fact that representation, discourse and language are cast as secondary to the material – only ever imitations of the object, the *a posteriori* action of (finite) human reason upon the (infinite) metaphysics of the material – necessitates a return toward this more fundamental basis.

Given the political and theoretical aims of the contemporary re-articulations of the material in geography the suggestion that they parallel Plato’s essence-image dichotomy is contentious. The aims of this current move toward an articulation of the material, the natural and the bodily (Grosz, 1994; Kirby, 1997; Whatmore 1997; Wolch & Emel 1995, 1998) are toward a non-essentialist and non-dualistic geographical practice – through a considered critique of the existing dualisms of body-mind, matter-language and nature-culture. The suggestion that this re-valorisation of the ‘real’ over the ‘mediated’ mirrors

Plato's most basic essentialism – the separation between essence and image – points to the vulnerability of this current of thought to a mindless essentialism of the natural. Authors such as Grosz (1999) and Whatmore (1997) have highlighted the potential for calls for the 'return' to the material, the bodily or the natural are fraught with the potential of a resurgence of the essentialism of 'the real'. Indeed, when it is suggested that the material, the bodily or the natural constitute a fundamental ground upon which to base geographical inquiry there is a danger that this basis is posited simply as an undifferentiated externality. As such there is a slippage between the re-valorisation of the material and an articulation of a universal metaphysics of the material, the natural or the bodily (Kirby, 1999).

There are two implications of the parallel between Plato's division between image and essence and the contemporary re-materialisation of social and cultural geography. As stated above it suggests the possibility of a re-emergence of an essentialism of the real. This possibility points to the potential for contemporary articulations of matter, the body and the natural to unquestionably reify notions of a natural, bodily or material *origin*. Secondly the distinction constructed between language and experience institutes a methodological division. The appearance of the thing is cast as both teleologically secondary and inferior metaphysically. The methodologies of sight, painting, writing and poetry are all considered secondary to the pure realm of the thing and the idea (ie philosophy). In a similar fashion calls for a 'return to the material' suggest that the current academic employment of theories of representation, discourse and imagery actually serve to obscure the 'real' object of analysis.

In this way methodologies of language and discourse are cast Platonically as endowed only with a limited (and often only academically fashionable) resemblance to the object. Take for example Gregson's (1995) conception of the need for a 'material culture perspective' in the analysis of practices of consumption.

The geographical literature on consumption highlight clearly the ascendance of the cultural, as opposed to social, theory in social geography (and in human geography more generally), and cultural theory in the tradition of Gramsci, Williams, Hall, and Said. At times inspirational, these writings manifestly have much to commend them. However, they bring with them a particular interpretation of consumption grounded in meaning, identity, representation and ideology. Personally, although I find these arguments attractive, I feel they require

a firmer grounding in structural social inequalities (the significant differences of gender, class, race, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc.) and in material culture. (p. 139)

In this way Gregson constructs a framework whereby the interpretation of textual, discursive and representative meaning is considered epistemologically distinct from the 'real' world of both matter and structural inequalities. Gregson mirrors Plato's dualism by suggesting that these textual methodologies require a firmer grounding, thereby divorcing language, text and imagery from the fundamental essence of the 'real' world. Indeed, it is the suggestion that 'material culture' may provide this firmer ground – as if 'the material' is somehow more solid, more natural and more real – that points to the presence of a universal metaphysics of the material in Gregson's account.

### **Matter as origin**

In positing a universal metaphysics of matter – a notion of materiality as a pure origin or radical outside – matter is divorced from any expressive physicality. In fact a conception of matter as origin institutes a deductive teleology whereby matter is governed by a linear passage from its origin as pure material form to its destination as a social and cultural product. Take for example Miller's (1987) conception of the process of consumption:

[C]onsumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is from a symbol of estrangement and price value to an artifact invested with particular inseparable connotations. ... Work in this sense does not necessarily mean physical labour transforming the object; it may signify the time of possession, a material context of presentation as ritual gift or memorabilia, or the incorporation of the single object into a stylistic array which is used to express the creator's place in relation to peers engaged in similar activities. The object is transformed by its intimate association with a particular individual or social group, or with the relationship between these. (p.191)

Miller (1987) presents a dialectical notion of the material – whereby matter is subject to a teleological process of 'externalisation' and 'sublation'. Miller's model of the production of matter speaks in terms of a relation of distances. The object – the pure material form – is *initially* distanced from the subject as a radical outside, a 'symbol of estrangement'. It is only subsequent to this pure original state – whereby the object undergoes the social and cultural work of consumption that it is transformed into a consumed object.

Again Miller states that:

‘... the modern process of consumption is a much neglected part of the great process of sublation by which society attempts to create itself through negation’ (p. 191)

What is interesting here is not Miller’s conception of the process of consumption but rather his conception of the malleability of the object’s materiality. The fact that he constructs the subject-object relation with reference to Hegel’s dialectic between alienation and sublation means that the production of the product is cast simply as the incorporation of a universal (and universally malleable) by socio-cultural systems. The fact that consumption is a process whereby society attempts to create itself positions matter as devoid of any creative power or defiance. In fact the methodological distinction between the material and the culture (essence and image) contributes to a notion of objection as a teleological process of externalisation *followed* by sublation leaving matter inert and ineffective.

The effect of this teleological process of externalisation and sublation is to posit matter as *a priori*. The notion of ‘externalisation’ is the equivalent of Derrida’s notion of purity quoted above, that material objects originate in a pure physical form upon which the latter action of the consumer is enacted. The notion of distance inherent in a conception of externalisation re-articulates matter as *a priori* precisely because it specifically instigates a notion of the object as absolutely (in the Kantian sense) external to subjective action. In this way the material, whilst representing a state of absolute and infinite externality, always has an origin. The material is cast as resolutely prior to and disconnected from subjective action. In fact it is only the physical contours of the object (as distinct from the essential object in Platonic terms) that forms a dialectical conduit between the subject and the object. Rather than a constant interplay between the subject and the object, this relationship is governed by the dialectics of sublation. In this way the materiality of the object becomes simply a synthetic point *between* the subject and the essential object – between an *a priori* object and an *a posteriori* subject. The articulation of the material in this way forms a critical stage in the re-articulation of a universal and essentialist metaphysics of the material.

The stages of Miller’s teleological process of externalisation and sublation attempt to map the materialisation of the object, from its *origin* at the point of institutional or mechanical formation to its *final* societal and cultural incorporation. Not only does the implicit

periodisation and linearity of this scheme assume matter as a fundamental *a priori* but matter remains inert and inexpressive throughout its formation. Matter simply exists as an undifferentiated yet dumb externality before its mechanical and institutional *formation*. The subsequent process of sublation simply points to the societal incorporation of the physical thing without necessarily challenging its mute materiality. In this way Miller's schema replicates the form-content dichotomy that matter's materialisation as an object is not due to any independent action of matter, but rather the determinative power of the object's essential form (the idea).

Similarly Lees (2002) in discussing the contribution of urban geography to a re-materialised social and cultural geography positions matter in terms of its starkness:

Unlike in, say, social and cultural geography, the turn to 'representation' in urban geography has centred on (the material) urban form. This focus on urban spatiality is not surprising given the city's *stark* physicality and *obvious* layering of economic, cultural, political and social relations. (p.107, emphasis added)

Similarly Philo's (2000) notion of the re-introduction of the material into contemporary geography is imbued with this conception of the metaphysical externality, base-ness and stability of matter as he equates matter with concrete, stating: 'More concretely (or even more materially)' (p. 37). Both Lees and Philo, together with Miller, position matter as some how both obvious – as simply there – and as radically external – as in a concrete basis upon which all other activity is placed. In this way a reductive logic of causality haunts current calls for a 'material culture' approach or a rematerialisation of contemporary social and cultural geography. An external materiality is acted upon by socio-cultural consumption and *thus* becomes an object. In this way the object is only granted objectivity insofar as it is culturally coded. Miller's reliance on Hegel's dialectical phenomenology confirms this logic of causality. Although Hegel's phenomenology purports to investigate the *a priori* conditions of knowledge – such as an absolute materiality – the central figure of Hegel's dialectic is the subject (Lawlor, 1998). In this way absolute spatial and material infinitude is centralised upon the subject because it is only *through* the subject (externalisation-sublation) that the object is produced. While a phenomenological approach appears to allow an account of matter outside its socio-cultural codification, the dialectic established between subject and object counters this aim. Indeed, although Miller, Philo and Jackson purport to construct an analysis that dwells in the physical tactility of the object it becomes clear that the materiality of the

object only *matters* inasmuch as it becomes symbolic of the process of subjective consumption. For example Jackson (2000):

From such a perspective, the meaning of material objects is embedded in specific cultural contexts as people use things (from ‘traditional’ pottery to ‘modern’ shopping centres) to objectify social relationships, providing a commentary on their social experience. (p. 10)

The physicality of the object is reduced to a sign of the relationship between the subject and the object, the material object is positioned simply as a ‘commentary’ upon subjective experience. Indeed, the materiality of the object – held to be paramount by Jackson – is finally divorced from the full materialisation of its physical manifestation. Matter only matters insofar as it objectifies ‘social relationships’. As such Jackson’s return to matter becomes simply a sign, a rhetorical strategy in the suggestion of a more ‘back-to-basics’ ethnographic methodology. The fact that the phenomenological notion of the matter operationalises a Kantian notion of matter as *a priori* disables a consideration of the materiality of matter. In fact the incorporation of matter as *a priori* signifies the subjugation of the material to a deductive teleology whereby matter only matters when connected to the subject. In this way the materiality of the object matters only inasmuch as it ‘objectifies social relationships’ rather than as fundamentally independent and active.

### **Conclusion – Toward an expressive physicality**

An unasked question that haunts contemporary notions of the re-materialisation of social and cultural geography is; ‘what matters about matter?’. Why is there a rhetorical link established between material physicality and academic significance? The current re-articulations of matter, as expressed by Gregson (1995), Miller (1998), Jackson (2000), Philo (2000) and Lees (2002), posit a ‘simple there-ness’ of matter – matter as the pre-discursive form of the object. Indeed these current notions of matter subjugate the material to the Platonic dualism between essence and image and also to the reductionism of a linear teleology of materiality. In this way matter only matters when it is centralised upon the subject – symbolic of the objectification of social relationships. The expressive waywardness of matter – the possibility of active forms of materiality outside the dialectics of the subject-object is expressly forbidden through this reductionism (Latour, 1993, Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, Law, 1994).



However to return to matter is to ‘speed-up’ geography, to subject its analysis to the *particular infinity* of physicality. In the first instance this is to refuse Miller’s dualism between the excessiveness of material culture and the reductionism of language. Rather language – as a physically embodied object of analysis – is itself internally unstable, a complex mixture of the abstract and the material (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Shields, 1991). Secondly there is a need for the development of a tautological concept of materiality – that matter matters because it MATTERS. That is the significance of matter is defined by the expressive action of matter – its signifying and representative capacity. This is to suggest that current articulations must be more philosophically explicit in refusing to allow the resurgence of notions of matter as a pure, original conditionality. Indeed any re-articulation of matter must break the logic of causation between the subject and the object. There must be a valorisation of the ways in which matter *acts* independently of and upon the subject. It is the diversity of material forms, its dirty, unwieldy, messiness that defines any contemporary interest in the material. In fact it is only with a valorisation of the physically expansive action of matter that matter may well be articulated on-its-own terms, rather than as a strategic sign for a return to the basics. Surprisingly *this form* of matter – on-its-own terms – is anything but Kantian, or insistent upon forms of absolute materiality. Rather it necessitates a notion matter as simultaneously – and unevenly – discursive and physical. To activate a notion of matter as independently expressive is to suggest a fundamental interdwelling of the material and the representational. This is then to rethink the modes of analysis and methodological assumptions common in human geography. There is a need to abandon the notion that empirical methods are necessarily about the *capturing* of the external world as data, inasmuch as there is a need to discard notions of geographical practice as necessarily producing knowledge and representations of an external (and sometimes material) world. Rather there is a need to re-invigorate geographical practice with a conception of collaboration (Law, 1994). In producing knowledge geographical methods collaborate with the external world, they invite certain temporary alliances between material orders. In producing a re-materialised social and cultural geography matter does not simply become the subject of future investigation. Rather to produce material knowledge is, in Bergson’s (1908 [1991]) terms, to *vary with* matter itself. It is to engage the creative and expressive potential of the material collaboratively. As such it is possible to initiate a notion of representation as material, as embodied and as problematically ontological. What matters about matter is not a simple and an unquestioned omnipresence but the

‘reality’ of matter’s own discursive and representative expression. Thus in conclusion in composing a re-materialised geography – one that does not ‘return’ so much as ‘re-ignite’ – the philosophical and metaphysical commitments of this move must be explicit. In talking of matter it is vital to define exactly what (or whose) kind of matter is enlivened.

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<sup>1</sup> For recent examples of this resilient vein of criticism see also Rodríguez-Pose (2001) or Yeung (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed the object of this analysis is not to compose a critique of the total work of any one of these authors. Rather by grouping them here I mean to highlight the explicit reintroduction of matter (as well as the physical into geographical analysis).

<sup>3</sup> This is to act upon Lees' (2002) call for a definition of matter, as she states: 'Defining what we actually mean by material and immaterial ought to be the first step in rematerializing geography.' (p.102).

<sup>4</sup> This dualism between language and material culture is especially apparent in Miller's work. Take for example his (2002) critique of Callon's analysis of the market. Whilst the substance of this critique is not important here it is significant that in countering Callon he raises against him not only arguments but also *an object*. Indeed he challenges Callon's notion of the market by drawing upon his own previous analysis of the *Jajmani* system of mutual exchange of objects and goods. In positioning this object – the subject of empirical and anthropological analysis – against Callon he again infers a kind of material excess that is simply irreducible to a more theoretical (i.e. linguistic) account of the same phenomenon.